



Donal Fox: The Scarlatti Jazz Suite Project (2009)

By Greg Thomas, Published: November 14, 2009

The Scarlatti Jazz Suite Project commences with a short aria in G minor by Domenico Scarlatti, the famed baroque composer of over 550 sonatas for harpsichord. Pianist Donal Fox evinces an elegant pianissimo touch, setting the stage for the title composition, which refracts another Scarlatti theme into a 3/4 romp, with repeating motifs that build tension.

Drummer Terri Lyne Carrington and bassist John Lockwood accentuate the pulse, joined by vibraphonist Warren Wolf, who lends rhythmic assent and an occasional contrapuntal response. One of the most brilliant aspects of this original Fox composition is the manner in which the bass and drums mutate rhythmic emphasis, without the usual walking/ride cymbal approach while maintaining a swing feel that takes flight into fast baroque passages played in unison by Fox and Wolf. Midway through, Fox changes the melodic theme and the rhythmic intensity approaches the feel of funk and even rock, without veering into hysteria.

Recorded live at Scullers Jazz Club in Boston, this outing is one of the most successful classical/jazz unions in recent memory. The Modern Jazz Quartet paved the way for Fox's approach, to be sure, yet his method is sui generis. On Horace Silver's classic ballad "Peace," Fox' subtle flourishes evoke the classical technique underpinning his prowess yet maintain the mood of the original. His interplay with Wolf, each echoing the swift runs of the other, morphs into a swinging section that incorporates a very brief classical theme before going back home to the melody.

"Variations On A Bach Fugue," featuring Lockwood's masterful bass, becomes a meditation on the blues replete with Don Pullen-esque elaborations and McCoy Tyner-like percussive comping. "Libertango" and "Oblivion," by Tango innovator Astor Piazzolla, are compositions perfectly suited for interpretation by Fox. Both take disparate musical forms and integrate them to create fine art.

John Coltrane's minor blues "Mr. Syms" is another highlight, as is Robert Schumann's "Davidsbundler," played with a tender, dreamy quality that leaves the audience breathless. Your breath will be taken away also, as the ingenious artistry of Donal Fox improvises on several hundred years of musical tradition with aplomb and veracity.

Track Listing: Aria; Scarlatti Jazz Suite; Peace; Variations on a Bach Fugue; Libertango; Mr. Syms; Davidsbundler; Variations on Piazzolla's Oblivion.

Personnel: Donal Fox: piano; Warren Wolf: vibraphone; John Lockwood: double-bass; Terri Lyne Carrington: drums.

